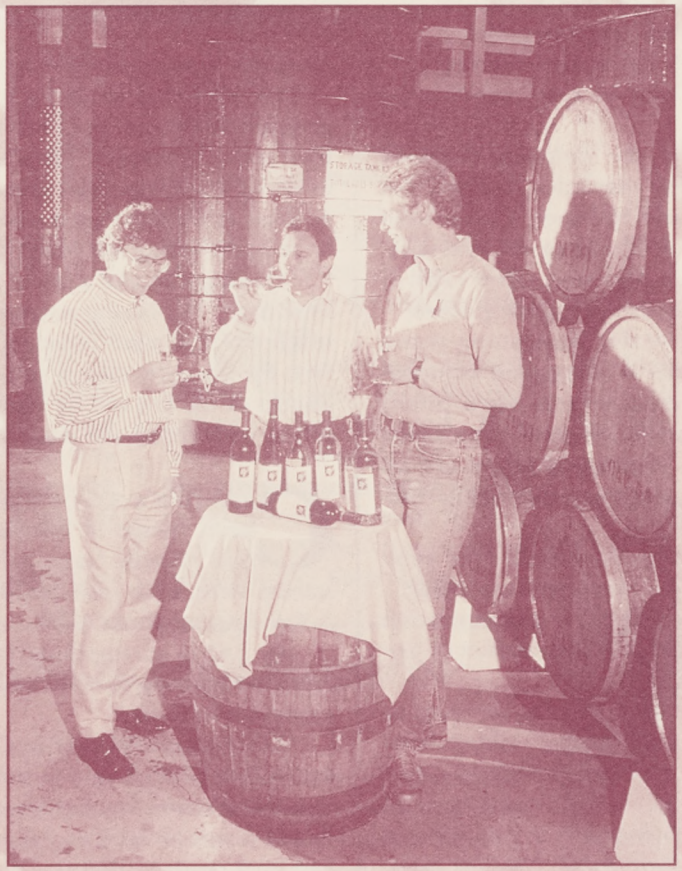
San Antonio



Riboli Family Reshapes Its Winery Image

Taste The History Of Los Angeles



California's grape-growing and wine-making history began in the early 1830s when a French immigrant in his mid-50s, Jean Louis Vignes, planted grapevines imported from France and began making wine in what is now downtown Los Angeles.

Within a few blocks of where Vignes helped establish California as a wine-growing state, one of California's oldest wine making families today is embarking on a new persona for its wines.

San Antonio Winery, the 15th-largest winery in California in terms of case sales in 1987, was founded 79 years ago and has been known until recently as essentially a producer of vin ordinaire, table wines sold in large jugs with screw caps. It wasn't bad wine, but neither was it distinguished.

In the last fifteen years, Maddalena wines have won a slew of awards at major wine competitions, including gold medals even when pitted against some of the industry's most prestigious names. Moreover, the Maddalena wines are all priced well below their Northern California competitors.

Until recently, however, the Ribolis have done little to promote this new-found premium image.

"We always have taken a conservative approach," said Santo Riboli, vice president of San Antonio.

"We always sat back and said, 'Are we ready to promote?' And maybe now we are," added Steve Jr., his brother and the other vice president.

Maddalena wines, all vintage-dated varietal wines from premium grapes grown in North Coast vineyards, now account for about 130,000 cases, more than 48%, of San Antonio's production. Said Steve Jr.

"We have taken a good five-year look at Maddalena, which we feel is the most important part of our future. It's definitely the strength of our brand. And until now, it has been basically an on-sale (restaurant) wine, but our most important push now is to go off-sale (retail)."

He said plans are being made to more actively promote the wines. For example, San Antonio has had artist Sebastian Titus design point-of-sale material that's fresh and attractive. A new decorated wine box will be used soon, and "we are going to be hand-selling our Maddalena wine."

Changes at the Lamar Street complex are imminent. The tasting room will be expanded and brightened. A wine museum complete with artifacts for the early days, a corkscrew collection and photos of the era will be installed. The restaurant will be remodeled and made brighter.

California's recent vinicultural history has been rooted in Northern California counties, notably Napa and Sonoma, but it all started here, with Jean Louis Vignes' pioneering in Los Angeles about 1833.

By 1851, more than 100 vineyards were reported growing in the county and the wine was prized for its quality.

San Antonio Winery was founded in 1917 by Santo Cambianica at a time when there were 92 bonded wineries in the city of Los Angeles. San Antonio was located on Lamar Street in an area east of downtown that was flourishing as a haven for vineyards.

Within two years, however, Prohibition jolted the region and most of the wineries closed, but Cambianica continued in business by selling grapes to home wine makers and by making altar wine for the church. (San Antonio and The Christian Brothers remain the only two wineries to

do a significant portion of their business in a sacramental wine. San Antonio produces 40,000 cases of wine for the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches.)

Steve Riboli Sr., Cambianica's nephew, joined the winery when Prohibition ended in 1934. By the 1950s, the property was one of the state's largest.

Last year, despite numerous mergers that have created giant wine companies throughout the state, San Antonio still ranked as the 30th largest winery in California, shipping an estimated 390,000 cases, up 5% from 1986.

Steve Jr., estimates that San Antonio will grow in excess of 15% per year.

Today, Steve and Maddalena Riboli remain in charge, but their three children are the day-to-day forces. Some one from the family is always in the building that now bears the designation Cultural Historical Monument No. 42.

Other family members also work. Cathy Riboli Colombatti, Steve and Maddalena's daughter, is treasurer. Santo's wife, Joan, also work at the winery.

Wine maker Jon Alexander has taken on the Maddalena wines as a personal quality project in the last ten years.

Occasionally, Alexander's mania for quality in the Maddalena line frustrates the two brothers. "He's such a perfectionist," says Steve Jr., with mock exasperation.

Visiting San Antonio is like a glimpse back in time. The tasting room is loaded with wine-related gifts and gadgets. Wines are displayed on the wall and in bins. At the other end of the tasting room is the entrance to the family restaurant, opened in 1975. It may be the best bargain lunch in town.

Being a Los Angeles-based winery has done little for the image of San Antonio. The brothers admit that the Maddalena line probably would be taken more seriously by connoisseurs if the winery were located in the Napa Valley.

Most of the wines in the line come from grapes grown in places like Napa and Sonoma and barrel-aged, then bottled on a new state-of-the-art bottling line.

Recently, San Antonio took the plunge and acquired a 20-acre vineyard in prestigious Rutherford, in the heart of the Napa Valley, from which to make vintner-grown Cabernet Sauvignon. And the family is looking for more Northern California acreage to acquire.

The remainder of the wines are made at San Antonio's facility in Monterey Sonoma and Napa Valley and bottled in Los Angeles. Included in that line are wines bottled under the labels of restaurants their "house wines." One longtime client is the Anthony's chain of San Diego, whose Vino di Casa has been made by San Antonio for years.



Riboli: Food Is Her Passion

The woman on the label is a darned good cook. Unlike such mythical foodies as Betty Crocker, the Maddalena of San Antonio Winery's Maddalena Vineyard is real. She is Maddalena Riboli, the matriarch of the family that owns and operates the winery. Matriarch, however, is far too overbearing a term for this youthful and contemporary woman.

At the moment, Riboli is in northern Italy, conducting wine business (San Antonio imports wines produced there) and researching her current love, pasta. As evidence of this interest, pasta strands now hang as decoration in the winery restaurant, where the bill of fare is entitle "Maddalena Award-Winning Entrees."

The restaurant has operated for 20 years drawing customers who find in the cool, cavernous winery building a pleasant escape from city congestion. They also find some wonderful food, the sort of hearty dishes one visualizes happy Italian families eating with gusto. Again, the food is real - really Italian and really home-style.

Riboli was born in Mombaruzzo, a small town in the province of Asti in Northern Italy. The seasoning of that region - sage, rosemary, bay leaf, basil and garlic - dominate her cookery and the dishes served at San Antonio. Riboli's Florentine lasagna, one of the restaurant's "award-winning entrees," was researched in Florence. And she is a stickler for freshness.

"I like to use everything from scratch," Riboli said. That includes making her own seasoned bread crumbs and marinara sauce.

The sauce, by the way, is simmered only about 20 minutes, which defies the rule that pasta sauces require long hours on the stove. "I don't believe in that," Riboli said.

Her standards are so exacting that she banished the caterer who had been engaged to handle the reception for son Steve and organized the dinner herself.

Refreshingly, Riboli is not stuck in tradition. Such non-Italian elements as teriyaki sauce stray into her cooking at home. She adds a dash of teriyaki, along with Chardonnay and water, to the pan when cooking a lamb roast. "It gives a good flavor and makes a nice sauce," she said. The lamb itself is seasoned with thyme, rosemary and garlic and browned in olive oil.

Like many others, Riboli has lightened some fare, "I haven't used meat sauces (for pasta) at my home for at least four years," she said. Her focus in Italy this month is pasta sauces, which are used sparingly there rather than flooding the plate American-style.

Riboli is spending much of her time in Asti, where the food is "fantastic," she said with pride. The region is known for mushrooms, which are a key ingredient in Chicken in Wine Sauce, a dish that sells briskly at the winery. The chicken is coated with homemade seasoned bread crumbs, baked with dry white wine (San Antonio's Velvet Chablis) and topped with sauteed mushrooms. The key to success in this dish is using small (2-pound) chickens that are lean and cook quickly, Riboli said. These may be hard to find, but they are available in some supermarkets.

Another popular dish at San Antonio is Eggplant alla Parmigiana. Dusted with flour and browned in olive oil, the eggplant is layered with mozzarella and Romano cheeses. Marinara sauce goes into the layers and also over the top. Both dishes are accompanied by buttery toasted rolls that have an unusual topping - seasoned bread crumbs.



SAN ANTONIO WINERY & RESTAURANT

A Gourmet Adventure in The Heart of Los Angeles

737 Lamar Street • Los Angeles, Calif.

213/223-1401